

Lofgren Calls for End to Religious Persecution in Vietnam

Media Contact: Kyra Jennings, 202.225.3072

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Congressional Caucus on Vietnam and the Congressional Human Rights Caucus today held a briefing examining the Vietnamese government's oppression of religious beliefs and practices. Advocates for international religious freedom gave expert testimony on the current violations of religious freedom in Vietnam and offered mechanisms for improvement in the country. The follow remarks were given by Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-San Jose), chair of the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam, to open the briefing:

"I would like to welcome all of you to our briefing on the current state of religious freedom in Vietnam. I would like to thank the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, specifically Mr. Lantos and Mr. Wolf, for co-chairing this briefing with the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam.

I'd also like to give a special thanks to our witnesses for being here, especially our witnesses who flew from San Jose, California, my district, and even as far away as France to be here today. The effort taken to be here today by these witnesses speaks volumes about the severity of the problem we will examine today. The dismal state of religious freedom in Vietnam needs to be exposed and I am pleased that you are all here to help us raise awareness in Congress and in the public.

It is discouraging to me that we have to continuously hold these Congressional briefings on Vietnam. I certainly look forward, in great anticipation, to the day when we no longer need these briefings because human rights are finally respected in Vietnam.

Over the past several years, Vietnam has begun to integrate itself into the global community. Its relationship with the United States has grown immensely, both economically and politically. Unfortunately, Vietnamese citizens are still being persecuted for their religious beliefs and practices.

The 80 million people that live in Vietnam practice several different religions. Approximately half of those residing in Vietnam are Buddhist, 8 to 10 % of the population is Roman Catholic, 1.5 to 4% belong to the Hoa Hao, 1.5 to 3% make up the Cao Dai, .5 to 2% is Protestant, and another .5% is Muslim. The rest of the population consider themselves non-religious.

While in theory the Vietnamese Constitution and government decrees provide for freedom of religious belief and practice, other provisions of the Constitution allow the government to arbitrarily declare a religion a national security threat. Only those religious organizations that are recognized by the government are legal. This means that the government arbitrarily restricts and controls religious activity by denying certain religious sects permission to gather and freely practice their religion. According to the State Department's 2004 International Religious Freedom report on Vietnam, "there [have been] no known cases in recent years in which the courts acted to interpret laws to protect a person's right to religious freedom."

The Vietnamese government further restricts religious beliefs and practices by requiring all religious publishing to be done through the Religious Publishing House, which is operated by the Office of Religious Affairs. Not only does the government control what religious materials may be printed, but it also controls the quantity of materials printed. As a result, Bibles in ethnic minority languages are often in short supply.

Due to these types of systematic infringements upon religious freedom in Vietnam, the U.S. State Department, in September 2004, designated Vietnam a country of particular concern (CPC). Such a designation requires the U.S. government to urge Vietnam, through diplomatic and economic avenues, to reform its stance on the treatment and recognition of religious beliefs and practices.

According to the United States Commission on Religious Freedom's Annual Report on Vietnam, Vietnam released some prominent advocates of free speech, freedom of religion, and democracy advocates in response to its CPC designation. Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, Nguyen Dinh Huy, and Thich Thien Minh were released, along with Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly who was imprisoned after submitting written testimony to the US Commission in 2001. Unfortunately, it has been reported that those released are under constant surveillance. Furthermore, several others remain in prison.

Following CPC designation, Vietnam responded with only a few other cosmetic actions to improve religious freedom. The Vietnamese Prime Minister issued "Instructions on Protestantism," which, according to the US Commission "purports to allow Protestant 'house churches' in the Central Highlands and northwest provinces to operate legally, if they renounce connections to groups that Hanoi has accused of organizing anti-government protests." Furthermore, while the "Instructions" prohibit forced renunciation, there are no criminal penalties. At the same time, the Prime Minister issued a decree that purports to affirm religious freedom in Vietnam while also prohibiting religious activities that "undermine peace, independence and national unity; incite violence or wage war; disseminate information against prevailing State law and policies; sow division among the people, ethnic groups, and religions; cause public disorder; do harm to other

people's lives, health, dignity, honor, and property; hinder people from exercising their public obligations; spread superstitious practices and commit acts to breach the law.”

In May 2005, the State Department announced that it had reached an agreement with the Vietnamese government regarding religious freedom. Unfortunately, the agreement allowed Vietnam to escape the sanctions that are normally imposed upon countries following a CPC designation. Considering Vietnam's very weak response to CPC designation, the State Department should have carried through with the typical requirements of a CPC designation. Raising the topic of human rights violations in meetings between Prime Minister Khai and President Bush as was done in June 2005 is not enough; positive and affirmative action is needed.

Despite tireless efforts by many courageous religious leaders who risk imprisonment like the witnesses here today, many actions from members of the U.S. Congress, and CPC designation, the Vietnamese government maintains its ability to control religious beliefs and practices through its power to recognize or deny recognition to religious organizations. This blatant denial of full religious freedom for its citizens, coupled with the inability of citizens to receive protection from the courts, has led me and many others to recognize human rights violations that are taking place under the umbrella of national solidarity.

Until Vietnam stops oppressing its people, the Commission on International Religious Freedom, representatives for religious organizations from Vietnam, Members of Congress, and other organizations and individuals will continue to speak out to raise awareness of religious freedom violations in Vietnam. Those of us in Congress will form and participate in Congressional Caucuses that focus on human rights abuses in Vietnam, we will continue to advocate for legislation such as the Vietnam Human Rights Act, and we will continue to hold briefings, like this one, to inform Congress and the public of Vietnam's government-sanctioned abuses of religious freedom.

The world is watching and we will not cease until we see improvements in Vietnam.”